SECRETARY BAKER'S TWISTED VISION OF THE SPIRIT OF '76

Professor Hart of Harvard Dissects the Secretary of War and Turns Light of History on Mr. Baker's NowFamousComparison Between Mexican Bandits and Our Soldiers of the Revolution

The Exact Facts Concerning Conditions in the Continental Army Are Presented by Eminent Writer, Who Also Discusses Some Events in History Much More Recent Than the Revolution

Secretary of War Baker's Modern Version of "The Spirit of '76"

"The Spirit of '76."

By ALBERT BUSHNELL HART,
Professor of History at Harvard.

NEWTON DIEHL BAKER was interspersed in the "Who's Who" of 1913 between two eminent men of that name, Moses Nelson Baker, the high authority on municipal engineering, and Orlando Harrison Baker, consul at various foreign ports. At that time Newton Diehl Baker was Mayor of Cleveland; previously city solicitor of Cleveland for ten years; previously private secretary to Postmaster-General Wilson for one year; hence his twelve lines of undying fame in "Who's Who." He was generally supposed to owe his elevation to his conection with Mayor Tom Johnson of Cleveland, a man with red blood if ever there was one.

After ceasing to be Mayor of Cleveland in 1914, after a two year term, Newton D. Baker waited for the lightning to strike him, meantime preserving his reputation of past master in "getting out the vote." The name of Newton D. Baker was a spell in Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati, cities which once were as sure Republican as Mark Hanna of Cleveland and Boss Cox of Cincinnati. Getting out whose vote? Here begins the coincidence which resulted in Newton D. Baker occupying a place from which a slam on the Revolutionary Army could be felt.

Secretary Lindley M. Garrison, a straightforward, able, conscientious Secretary of War, wanted to see his country protected by an adequate military force. Congress substituted for his plan what has since proved to be a weak, trifling and miserable system, which preserved most of the defects of the old militia and furnished some new ones.

President Wilson sympathized with Garrison, but discovered that the psychical moment had come when it was undemocratic to oppose the will of the sovereign people of the United States as expressed through their elected representatives. Hence, on that issue, Garrison resigned February 10, 1916, rather than to undertake to work what he believed to be an unworkable plan. President Wilson deplored, exactly as he deplored Secretary Bryan's departure; but he survived both shocks.

Here was the golden opportunity for the Administration of efficiency, which had suffered some hard knocks. For instance, it was loaded up with Secretary Redfield, within whose jurisdiction was the inspection of passenger steamers on the Great Lakes. A glorious opportunity came to Secretary Redfield when the steamer Eastland July 24, 1915, capsized in the Chicago River, performing the unexampled feat of a steamer thirty feet high turning over and drowning more than a thousand people in fifteen feet of water. The Secretary of Commerce could show the country how careful his Department was of the lives of Americans; how strict and searching were the rules of his Department; how swift the penalty inflicted upon inspectors who failed to do their duty; how eager the Department was to collect information which would lead to the prosecution of the murderers of the Eastland victims.

Did Secretary Redfield show the diamond brain and the iron will and the marble hand in this crisis? Far from it; he practically indorsed the defence of the inspectors, which was that when they certified that the Eastland was "seaworthy," they meant that she was seaworthy when at sea. If she had turned turtle on Lake Michigan, they would have been grieved; but when, by the joint and criminal fault of the owners and the officers of the steamer, she lay down sidewise in the Chicago River, that was a trick which had not been covered by the rules; and therefore the inspectors disclaimed responsibility for this dreadful disaster.

While Secretary Redfield was trying to cool off the burning public sentiment, President Wilson made a specific request (or direction, if you choose so to put it, that Redfield should cause a thorough investigation to be made. The Secretary promised to make that investigation. It has never been made. Some Presidents—say Theodore Roosevelt—would have requested a delinquent Cabinet officer like that to "put up or shut up." Mr. Redfield is still Secretary of Commerce fifteen months after this exhibition of his incapacity.

Meanwhile, where does Newton D. Baker come in? He comes into the War Department under date of March 6, 1916. March 6, 1916, was a date of significance in the War Department, because it came in a period when the people of the United States were at last aroused to the fact that they were undefended against modern means and dimensions of warfare, as shown by the ferocity and magnitude of the great European war.

Our army was both costly and inadequate. The Navy and the War departments were cumbered with red tape and a bureau organization for which Congress was chiefly responsible. A few officers were attempting to arouse the country to a sense of its military weakness and the dangers of the future. The Secretary of War was head of the service, which comprised several thousand civilians, over 5,000 commissioned officers and 92,000 enlisted men. The service was always technical, and the demands upon the organization were doubled by the sudden development of the military art.

The retirement of Secretary Garrison gave the opportunity to the President to place at the head of the War Department either an expert in war or an expert in handling great numbers of men. The time was ripe for designating a military man; other countries take military and naval officers out of active service to fill the positions of Ministers of War and Marine.

The first Secretary of War of the United States, Knox, was a soldier. Gen. Grant was Secretary of War, ad interim for five months in 1867. Gen. Rawlins was Secretary of War for a time under Grant. Or, if the country could not bear the shock of seeing a soldier in charge of the soldiering department, was there no former officer to be found? Had no man in House or Senate made the army his study for years? Was no jurist or publicist expert in that field?

Apparently no such man could be discovered in the ranks of the Democratic party. Then why not select a man of vast experience in directing men and affairs, such a man as James J. Hill, a man who could break through the mouldy traditions of the War Office and whose skill, integrity and national reputation would carry the country with him?

Apparently no such man as that was wanted; for in this period of national tension and potential national danger the President selected Newton D. Baker of Cleveland. Mr. Baker's abilities are undoubted; by some accounts he was a creditable Mayor of an immense and difficult city.

Nevertheless he was not appointed because of any administrative qualities but because of his supposed ability to carry the State of Ohio for the Democratic ticket; which is perhaps the reason why the Old Guard of the Republicans in Ohio is now reported to be shivering in its shoes. As Assistant Secretary of War the President selected an ex-Mayor of Portland, Me., whose expert knowledge of the military art was thus established for the first time.

Secretary Baker is the President's Secretary of War; he is not expected to put in his time in trying to reorganize his department and the army so as to make them adequate for the pressing necessities of his country. Just now he is making campaign speeches. The practice is in itself unobjectionable; a man who believes in his political chieftain ought to be willing to speak for him. The only trouble is that Secretary Baker has spoken once too often.

In a recent address at Jersey City he is reported to have paid his respects to the Revolutionary soldiers. It is of no use to quote the Secretary of War, because he says that the published reports are inaccurate; but he does not supply a text of his remarks which could be paralleled with the notes of the stenographers on that occasion. Nor does he deny that he did make a comparison between the Mexican bandits and the soldiers of the Revolution which was unfavorable to the American patriots.

It is not quite clear from the reports whether Baker meant to argue that our Revolutionary ancestors were rough but the right kind of men and therefore that the Mexicans are justified in their peculiar methods of warfare, or whether the Secretary argued that the Mexicans are a bad lot who learned their art of war from reading books about the American Revolution. There is, however, a very clear issue in the whole matter, namely that Secretary Baker, a high official of the United States Government and the present head of the army of the United States, publicly takes the ground that the first army of the United States was made up of, or at least contained a large number of, scoundrels of the deepest dye, who burned, ravaged, robbed and murdered their own countrymen.

Are there any proofs of this amazing semi-official statement? It sounds as though Secretary Baker's acquaintance with the literature on the American soldiers of the Revolution was confined to some of the modern defences of the British cause. One of the most spiteful is Henry Belcher's "The First American Civil War," published in London in 1911. Even he draws it mild on the question of robbery by the troops. He adds:

"The condition of the men being thus that of unmitigated privation, they often got out of hand. They plundered friend and foe alike. The patriot farmer and the loyalist patroon alike drove into hiding the contents of byre and pen and hen roost on the approach of the Continental forces. The visit of troops was as if a simoon had swept over the farmstead; even the straw had gone to furnish a temporary bed. This marauding was as persistent throughout the seven years fighting as were the continued impotence of Congress and the ineradicable greediness of dishonesty of contractors."

Belcher's acquaintance with American conditions and his scrupulous adherence to moderate forms of statement are revealed in another quotation a little further on: "It appears that births in American families aggregated commonly twenty or twenty-five children to each couple of parents, yet the number that reached adolescence was small."

Another more vitriolic book of the same type is Arthur Johnston's "Myths and Facts of the American Revolution," written by a British Canadian, an intense defender of the loyalists, and published in Toronto in 1908. Among his flowers of rhetoric are the following:

"So great had been the dearth of recruits, even in the very centre of disaffection, that it had been found necessary to enlist negroes (slave as well as free), boys unable to bear arms, old men unfit to endure the fatigues of the campaign and deserters from the British ranks, the latter being enticed away for that purpose. * * *

"Such men as these, when persuaded or hired to enlist, made but indifferent soldiers * * * and, as a last device, conscription was resorted to. For these and other causes the army of the Revolution was never an effective one. * * *

"The regular, or so-called Continental troops, * * * were infected by the spirit of desertion, * * * though they were plunderers of friend as well as foe; though they were riotous, licentious and mutinous to an alarming extent; though for a long period they could not be brought to march boldly up to a work nor stand exposed in a plain; though they, too, were liable to be seized by panics, * * * yet, by means of the indefatigable perseverance of their Commander in Chief, aided by trained European drill masters; by the gradual weeding out of such of the officers as had been elected by their men, not for their military abilities, but because they were lenient and even subservient to them; the Continental levies at length were moulded into a force that was efficient as an auxiliary to the more highly trained troops of France."

If Secretary Baker had confined himself to criticism of the American army for its wretched military organization and lack of efficiency he might have made a case—not against the army or its officers, or its Commander in Chief or its men, but against its militia system, which was the curse of the war. No one was more aware of the lack of training, discipline and esprit de corps than Gen. George Washington, whose letters abound in denunciations of the whole system. For instance, he wrote in 1776:

"Short enlistments, when founded on the best plan, are repugnant to order and subversive of discipline; and men held upon such terms will never be equal to the important ends of war; but when they are of the *volunteer* kind they are still more destructive. * * *

"Those who engage in arms under what conditions they may, are uneasy, impatient of command, ungovernable; and claiming to themselves a sort of superior merit, generally assume not only the privilege of thinking but of doing as they please; added to these considerations, such corps are long in forming, and half of their time is taken up in marching to and from camp at a most amazing expense; nor are the injuries to which a country is exposed by the frequent marching and countermarching of men to be disregarded. * * * In a word, sir, I cannot advise the volunteer plan, as I conceive the adoption of it would have the most fatal and pernicious tendency."

If Secretary Baker had said that Congress and the States during the Revolution insisted on a deplorable system of raising men for the army, which but for the aid of the French would have collapsed, he would have uttered a wholesome truth especially useful at this moment. On that point there are plenty of witnesses outside of Washington, for instance, Gen. von Steuben, who on his arrival in 1778 discovered that:

"The eternal ebb and flow of men engaged for three, six and nine months who went and came every day rendered it impossible to have either a regiment or a company complete; and the words company, regiment, brigade and division were so vague that they did not convey any idea upon which to form a calculation, either of a particular corps or of the army in general. They were so unequal in their number that it would have been impossible to execute any manœuvres. Sometimes a regiment was stronger than a brigade. I have seen a regiment consisting of thirty men and a company of one corporal. * * *

"The soldiers were scattered about in every direction. The army was looked upon as a nursery for servants, and every one deemed it his right to have a valet; several thousand soldiers were employed in this way.

"The majority of the States engaged their soldiers for from four to six months. Each man who went back took his musket with him, and his successor received another from the public store. No captain kept a book. Accounts were never furnished or required. As our army is, thank God, little subject to desertion, I venture to say that during an entire campaign there have not been twenty muskets lost since my system came into force. * * *

"With regard to their military discipline, I can safely say no such thing existed. In the first place there was no regular formation. A so-called regiment was formed of three platoons, another of five, eight and nine, and the Canadian regiment of twenty-one. The formation of the regiments was as varied as their mode of drill, which only consisted of the manual exercise."

That this lack of proper discipline, caused by rapid change of recruits and the election of officers by their own men, occasionally ran to excesses is not to be denied. In 1777 Washington wrote to Gov. Livingston:

"Their officers are generally of the lowest class of the people; and, instead of setting a good example to their men are leading them into every kind of mischief, one species of which is plundering the inhabitants under the pretence of their being Tories. A law should, in my opinion, be passed to put a stop to this kind of lawless rapine; for unless there is something done to prevent it the people will throw themselves of choice into the hands of the British troops. But your object should be a well regulated militia law. The people, put under good officers, would behave in quite another manner and not only render real service as soldiers but would protect instead of distressing the inhabitants."

One cause for great disorder was the system of seizing specific supplies in critical periods of the war, without which the army would have gone to pieces for lack of food. Certificates were given for these supplies, but it was more than ten years before they were cashed. It is this seizure of supplies in the immediate neighborhood of the field of war, a system probably practised by every army in the field in Europe to-day, which gives color to the charge that the American army looted right and left.

As for outrages on the civil population, for the most part the American armies were in a friendly country in all their campaigns; and the temptation to robbery or brutality was small. The cases that occurred were contrary to orders, and subjected the guilty man to penalties such as are recorded by Surgeon James Thatcher, who wrote in 1780:

"Death has been inflicted in a few instances of an atrocious nature, but in general, the punishment consists in a public whipping, and the number of stripes is proportioned to the degree of offence. In aggravated cases, and with old offenders, the culprit is sentenced to receive one hundred lashes, or more. In some instances of incorrigible villains, it is adjudged by the court that the culprit receive his punishment at several different times, a certain number of stripes repeated at intervals of two or three days, in which case the wounds are in a state of inflammation and the skin rendered more sensibly tender; and the terror of the punishment is greatly aggravated. Another mode of punishment is that of running the gantlet."

This testimony brings out one of the many startling differences between Gen. Villa and Gen. Washington. One orders his men to rob and murder; the other, by the sternest orders and the severest punishments, recalled the wayward and the undisciplined to their duty to their army and their people. Another cogent difference is that mutilation, torture, rapine, violence to women and murder of non-combatants are the breath of life to Villa and his crew, and were almost unknown in the annals of the Revolutionary army.

Mrs. Esther Reed, who founded what we should now call a Red Cross society for the soldiers, was not aware of any of these outrages which either horrify or amuse Secretary Baker. Mme. Riedesel, wife of a commander of German mercenaries and captured with him at Saratoga, records the consideration with which she was received by Gen. Schuyler; and in all her experiences in Cambridge and afterward at Charlottesville, Va., discovered no Villas in the American army.

Posterity knows the American military leaders, Washington, Putnam, Morgan, Gates, Schuyler, Greene and a score of others, who were both brave and merciful. Even the traitor and embezzler, Arnold, was a gentleman in the field. The glimpses that we have of their camp life are full of humanity and polish. They are as much like the Mexican comanders of the present day as the Chevalier Bayard was like a Turkish bashi-bazouk.

There was a field of operations in which persons who assumed to represent both sides were guilty of excesses that ran into barbarity. That was the border ground between British and American armies lying near each other. The zone between New York and West Point, was filled with marauders, who were part of neither army. South Carolina, after the second British invasion, was in a fearful state of partisan warfare between troops regularly enrolled; between irregular companies out of touch with headquarters; and between groups of bandits who plundered the other side by preference, but were a curse to their own friends. Many were the excesses on both sides, and on neither side are those excesses chargeable to the armies or their leaders.

The animus of the charge of Secretary Baker, is that the organized army of the United States was as irresponsible and inhuman as the so-called armies of Carranza and Villa. Two British forces were captured in the course of the war; those of Burgoyne and Cornwallis. The prisoners then made, as well as those made in other fights, were treated with humanity. Many even of the detested Hessians settled in the country after the war was over, and their descendants are still here, cordially accepted as fellow-citizens.

An American army occupied most of Canada for several months; an American force raided the British West India port, New Providence; the Virginia troops under George Rogers Clark captured the British post of Vincennes. In no case are there charges of the murder of prisoners and non-combatants, such as is the regular day's work of the Mexican revolutionists.

And what was the American army against which the official head of the present American army brings charges of riot and rapine? It was the army which attracted such noble spirits as Lafayette, who was honored to accept the friendship of its officers and to assume high command. It was the army with which Rochambeau and the French allies cooperated in the final victory of Yorktown. It was the army which faced the British through the terrible winter of 1777-1778. Somehow the few thousand men in winter quarters at Valley Forge, half fed, half clothed, poorly armed, badly disciplined, insubordinate to their immediate officers, foraging in the countryside for their daily bread and food for their animals, was a better army than the experienced regular redcoat regiments under Howe, lying a few miles away in their snug cantonments in Philadelphia.

When, a century hence, some Secretary of War goes back to the newspaper accounts of the call of the militia to serve on the Mexican frontier in 1916 he will tell the world that in the era of Newton D. Baker, then the highest official of the American army, American militiamen broke into bake shops and helped themselves to food. Perhaps the official will deduce from such peccadilloes that the soldiers were part of an army of braggarts and thieves.

Let it be remembered in that time, as it should be remembered at this day, that every army, even Cromwell's Ironsides, Stonewall Jackson's brigade and Sherman's veterans, contains some men who would loot if they got the chance. No army, no War Department ought to be measured by its poorest material. The vital question is, What has been the policy and purpose of the officers and the controlling influences? Most of the organized Mexican forces for a hundred years past have murdered prisoners, have ill used foreigners, have stolen private property, and in many cases have descended to the most abominable outrages and excesses.

To place on an equality Mexican military forces which are saturated from commander to camp follower with the spirit of rapine against the Revolutionary army of usually humane men, commanded by officers of character, however loosely organized and disciplined, is like comparing a dance hall with a Y. M. C. A. There are some rascals in all societies. What is the proportion? How far are they kept under? That is the issue.

From still another point of view Secretary Baker's insulting comparison slams against a stone wall. Villa is a disgraced commander, who was able to keep the field during the period when he was allowed to receive munitions from the United States, which were withheld from his rivals. The only exploit of Villa in which we are vitally affected was a raid against a United States post, which lasted a few hours. The men of Valley Forge, on the other hand, whom Secretary Baker holds so cheap, were part of the aggregation which defeated the English army and navy, wrested independence and divided the British Empire.

It is fashionable nowadays to scale down the military reputations of Washington and his associates. Let it never be forgotten that those crude and chaotic regiments held their lines in the face of a great European nation; that the Americans defeated Burgoyne, defeated Howe, and, with the aid of the French, defeated Cornwallis; that man for man they were better than the redcoats; and general for general they were better than the picked commanders of England. The men at Valley Forge will be remembered and honored centuries after the personnel of the present War Department has sunk into "innocuous desuetude."